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Stranger Than Fiction

**STRANGERS ON A BRIDGE:
THE CASE OF COLONEL ABEL**
By James B. Donovan
Atheneum. 425p. \$6.95

Ever since March 1, when *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* vaulted to the top, spy stories have claimed four or five places out of every "top ten" listing of best-selling fiction. "The Defenders" clobbers its TV competition on the home screen. Erle Stanley Gardner's courtroom whodunits in paperback sell in the hundreds of thousands. So why hasn't *Strangers on a Bridge* hit the top ten yet? Talk about conspiracies!

I don't understand it. This book has everything. A former OSS counsel, James B. Donovan, is appointed by the Brooklyn Bar Association to defend Col. Rudolf Ivanovich Abel, KGB, whom the newspapers call the Kremlin's "master spy." Donovan squares his shoulders and goes into it like a bulldog. He carries the case all the way to the Supreme Court, where he loses a hairbreadth 5-4 decision.

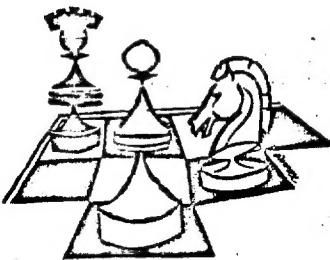
Abel is sentenced to 30 years in prison. Then shadowy letters, purporting to be from Abel's wife but smack-ing of the KGB, start arriving at Donovan's office. He turns them over to the FBI, CIA and the State Department. The courtroom drama turns into a spy thriller.

It is Donovan, at the request of the U. S. Government, who pretends to fly to England on business but steps alone, past the guards on the Berlin Wall, into the vast prison of East Berlin to negotiate the exchange of Col. Abel for U-2 pilot Francis Powers. Donovan ups the ante by asking for American students Frederic Pryor and Marvin Makinen. The Russians procrastinate; the cloak-and-dagger game goes on, with stolen phone numbers and a dangerous surprise visit to the Soviet Embassy. But Donovan wins the gamble and Frederic Pryor is released along with Powers.

Besides Abel and Donovan, the cast of characters is fascinating: Reino Hayhanen, alias Eugene Nicoli Maki, the bumptious No. 2 spy who can't do anything right and ultimately betrays Abel; Sergeant Roy A. Rhodes, U.S.A., who gets himself into some "compro-

mising" situations in Moscow; Judge Mortimer W. Byers, D. J., the stern and tough-minded trial judge; Ivan Alexandrovich Schischkin, chief of the KGB in Western Europe, who masquerades as the "Second Secretary of the Soviet Embassy" in East Berlin; Herr Wolfgang Vogel, the East German lawyer Schischkin uses as a puppet to handle the Pryor exchange; "Frau Abel," the German character actress who plays the part of Abel's wife in East Berlin; "Cousin Dreeves," the lean, hard-looking Otto the Strangler from the East German police who pretends to be Abel's cousin and shadows Donovan; Francis Gary Powers, who is finally released in the morning mists on Glienicker bridge.

The first two-thirds of the book cover Abel's arrest and trial. The spy



paraphernalia—hollow coins, micro-film, short-wave radios, "drops," hollow bolts and tie clasps, ciphers—should delight espionage buffs. Mr. Donovan has chosen just the right amount of dialogue from the official trial transcript to keep the pages bright and Perry Mason fans enthralled. There are objections to "leading questions" by the prosecutor, heated exchanges between counsel ("Your Honor, is Mr. Donovan raising an objection or making a speech?"), nice bits of cross-examination when the witness is led up the primrose path to contradiction, the judge's acid rulings ("All right, Mr. Donovan. Your objection is noted, and it is overruled.").

Yet, despite the tension-filled ending and the crackling courtroom drama, Mr. Donovan has managed to keep his word to Col. Abel about the writing of this book. They had discussed it once and Abel said he knew a book would probably be written; he

said he would prefer that Donovan write it rather than a "professional writer who might exaggerate or distort facts to increase popular consumption."

Perhaps that's why the book hasn't made the best-seller list. Mr. Donovan has kept it objective and dignified. He evinces respect, as befits a lawyer, for the prosecutor and the judge who "overruled" his best points. He paints a fair and unbiased picture of Abel the spy and Abel the man. Only in the East German episodes does Mr. Donovan let his heart rule his head and pen to color his descriptions of the actors and the scene. By and large, though, the book is a thriller, both in court and behind the Brandenburger Tor; better than that, it's true.

DANIEL L. FLAHERTY